

SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT - RURAL TRANSPORT POLICY INITIATIVES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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Abstract

This paper considers rural transport policy initiatives with reference to the problem of social exclusion in Northern Ireland. This includes the consideration of recent developments in community transport and policy developments through the Regional Development Strategy and Regional Transportation Strategy as well as the Rural Transport Fund for Northern Ireland.

Transport deprivation in rural areas has long been recognised as an important problem, but only recently have moves been made to try to overcome the problem. This paper reviews a number of transport initiatives in rural areas. As society becomes more mobile, so people living in both urban and rural areas wish to move around with minimum of difficulty. The desire to travel is, largely, satisfied in urban areas, but not so in rural regions as a result of the dispersed population here. Although car ownership levels tend to be high, significant transport problems are faced by those many people in rural areas with no access to any mode.

The paper uses case studies to illustrate recent policy developments that have resulted in the creation of many forms of community transport. These are forms of transport provided by members of the community in order to satisfy the requirements of those within their community. Initially the need for community transport was developed to meet the needs of the elderly and disabled. As a result of policy developments designed to promote social inclusion schemes are now being developed to meet the transport needs of other categories of users who may experience transport disadvantage to the same degree. These groups include women, the unemployed, single parents, and members of ethnic minorities. Community transport initiatives include the introduction of demand responsive and more localised services in areas inaccessible to scheduled or conventional bus services that may connect with scheduled services to transport people to their final destination.

These Community Transport initiatives have seen significant growth in recent years, mainly due to the development of the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) and the Regional Transportation Strategy (RTS) by the Department for Regional Development for Northern Ireland. This is the first time Northern Ireland has had a strategic Government document from which to develop, amongst other things, transport links in the region. The RDS highlights the issue of needing to 'promote social inclusion for those in rural areas of Northern Ireland, whilst also considering the wider social, environmental and economic implications of transport to rural communities. Concerns with deprivation and transport disadvantage have also been identified in the RTS, whilst recognising that a real impact can be had by the Transportation sector on some of the factors that cause social need and social exclusion and on the problems experienced by deprived and socially disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland. Much emphasis continues to be placed, throughout the strategy, regarding rural areas served by different types of accessible public transport drawn from a varied range, including flexible and community based services, responsive to local needs. Thus, it is recognised that the RTS for Northern Ireland contains three principle components: transportation initiatives composed of infrastructure or service

interventions... organisational, policy or legislative changes relating to transportation... transport related initiatives that will contribute to the achievement of the transportation objectives. The creation of the Rural Transport Fund for Northern Ireland (RTFNI) has also led to greater emphasis on providing socially necessary bus services throughout more isolated regions. The RTF has provided much needed support to Translink for its Ulsterbus services as well as assistance, both financial and otherwise, for a number of Community Transport Partnerships, covering the majority of rural Northern Ireland.

The very nature of Community Transport varies significantly from place to place. It is true that, on the whole, such transport is of an unconventional nature. That is, it tends to be more demand responsive, includes flexible routing as well as semi-structured timetables, which are recognised features of such operations. They strive to operate according to the exact needs of the community they serve. Effectively this is transport by the community for the specific requirements of the community.

The significance of the development and publication of the Regional Development Strategy and the Regional Transportation Strategy in the context of Northern Ireland cannot be underestimated. This is the first time such attention has been given to development and transportation issues in the region. Notwithstanding this, seeking to acknowledge and/or address the issue of transport disadvantage especially in rural areas is of great importance and a significant step forward. It is for this reason that the paper considers recent developments in this important area and includes case studies of the sort not seen before in Northern Ireland.

Keywords: Rural transport; Social exclusion/inclusion

Topic Area: H4 Strategic Changes in Transportation Organizations

1. Introduction and background

Northern Ireland is a predominantly rural region of just over 1,685,267 million people (2001 census data), the majority of whom live in urban areas around the province's main city, Belfast. The average population density is 1.19 people per hectare and it is the dispersed nature of this population across rural areas of the province that leads to difficulties in the provision of public transport services. These difficulties result in a significant reliance on the private car and a high proportion of car ownership – 691,662, amounting to 41% of the population owning such a vehicle.

Despite such a high level of car ownership and reliance on this mode extending to those who cannot drive through the prevalence of lifts, problems of transport disadvantage in rural areas still affect many people. This can lead to social exclusion and feelings of isolation, mainly among those who cannot drive (the young, the elderly, those on low incomes and women). Many people, therefore, cannot access key services and facilities on the basis of the transport provided.

As car ownership levels in rural Northern Ireland are relatively high, the problem of rural accessibility is not so widespread and not widely recognised. It is, nonetheless, a major problem. There are still deprived rural areas where car ownership levels are well below average, thus leaving a number of people in the Northern Ireland countryside increasingly isolated (especially in the west). The problems surrounding those in rural areas without cars or those who are unable to drive include exclusion from services and facilities, especially with the decline of many rural villages, services and movements towards concentrated centres of employment and services such as retail parks and regional town centres. Nutley (1992) reinforces realisation of the problem in that the problem of rural accessibility in Northern Ireland is defined in terms of the public transport system. The prevalence of increasingly long and costly travel distances faced by many rural

dwellers to access service and facilities points to a huge level of reliance on the private car and, thus barriers encountered by those unable to avail of this mode. The key difficulty, therefore, is one of a severe lack of accessibility.

These problems have become more prevalent in recent years with increases in commuting alongside movement out of urban areas to live in the countryside, as people tend to become more mobile (Thomas 2001). This is fine for those who can satisfy this level of mobility, but leads to barriers, problems and severe difficulties for many others. As the population steadily ages, there are increasing numbers of elderly dependants. Many of these people are no longer able to drive and, therefore, rely on other modes to satisfy their mobility needs. The problem in areas with poor accessibility becomes one of social exclusion for many elderly people, disabled people, women and under 17-year olds who are still not of driving age.

Transport issues in Northern Ireland are taking increasing precedence. The main issues include accessibility of both services and of vehicles, the replacement of ageing bus and train fleets, improved funding for developing new and sustaining existing services on the bus and railway networks (especially in rural areas) and the creation of a strategic regional transportation network accounting for road infrastructure and public transport alike. For years the transport system in Northern Ireland has suffered from a lack of foresight and, more importantly, a lack of funds. Major improvements have been visible in recent years through key infrastructure improvements such as road construction and attempts to provide more socially necessary bus services, particularly for the elderly and disabled in both urban and rural areas.

There have been numerous policy developments in recent years with targets set to ‘create an accessible countryside (RDS for NI 2025, 2002) and ‘to have a modern, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone’s’ quality of life (RTS for NI, 2001). These policy developments have seen the birth of a number of new transport initiatives in order to reduce the problem of social exclusion, especially in rural areas of the province.

1.1 The regional development and regional transportation strategies

The new Regional Development Strategy specifically highlights the issue of needing to “promote social inclusion” (RDS for NI 2025, 2002), for those in rural Northern Ireland. Whilst recognising the “wider social, environmental and economic implications of transport to rural communities” (RDS for NI 2025, 2002) the following are identified as aims in this process: “to create an accessible countryside with a responsive transport network that meets the needs of the rural community, enhance the accessibility of rural Northern Ireland by upgrading the Regional Strategic Transport Network; and improve accessibility in rural areas, particularly to the key and link transport corridors and centres of employment and services...” (RDS for NI 2025, 2002).

Recently the Department for Regional Development has argued for the introduction of a restructured public transport system and organisation using competitive tendering. The transportation vision in such a context, as well as in the Regional Development Strategy is set out as having “a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone’s quality of life”. A new public transport company would be set up under these arrangements, ‘Transport Northern Ireland’, introducing private sector investment “as a way of better exposing it to market forces, improving quality and efficiency, increasing attention to customer requirements and reducing the cost of service provision where practical”. (DRDNI, 2002).

In September 2002, the Department for Regional Development (DRDNI) published a consultation paper on the future of public transport in the province which reinforced the argument for competitive tendering on the basis of targets set out in the Regional Development and Transportation Strategies. The key element of this consultation is the plan to “through time, and in a manner that is publicly acceptable and financially feasible, the public transport market would be opened up to private sector participation as a way of better exposing it to market forces, improving quality and efficiency, increasing attention to customer requirements and reducing the cost of service provision where practicable”. (RDS for NI, 2001).



Figure 1: The ‘Rural Rover’ is Northern Ireland’s first flexible demand responsive bus service and is made possible through cross-subsidy and the Rural Transport Fund.

In terms of social inclusion in rural areas, this may be detrimental to the level of bus service provision. Under current arrangements, Ulsterbus can cross-subsidise between profitable (mainly urban or services in Greater Belfast) and unprofitable (mainly rural) routes. It is, perhaps, unlikely that private sector operators will be inclined to maintain loss-making services in less densely populated and less accessible regions. On the other hand, however, a regulatory body would provide support of a financial nature and on a contractual basis, specifying the payments to be made for a defined quantity and quality of service. Such a set-up may eliminate the problem of less-than-adequate rural services. Whether or not these proposed arrangements will contribute to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s transportation vision [“to have a modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone’s quality of life.”], remains to be determined. On the other hand, there is significant potential for the reversal of years of under investment.

The policy context laid out by the Department highlights the region’s long-term transportation vision, as mentioned. This will be supplemented by a number of transport plans such as the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP, 2000). On the rural transport front, the principal characteristics related to public transport are: “rural areas serviced by different types of accessible public transport drawn from a varied range, including flexible and community based services, responsive to local needs”. Indeed, the proposals outlined in terms of private sector investment and participation in the public transport system require significant departmental intervention and support to maintain rural ‘socially necessary’ but unprofitable services. “If transportation funding continues at current patterns of expenditure, the future for transportation and consequently for the economic, environmental and social well-being of Northern Ireland is bleak. There is a compelling case for a significant increase in transportation investment.” (RTS for NI, 2002-2012). If this increased expenditure is forthcoming, the potential for improvements is huge, such as the introduction of demand responsive and wider-ranging community transport services in rural areas.

There is obviously an issue as to whether or not competitive tendering or franchising of bus services will be effective in dealing with the problem of social exclusion, especially in rural areas. The policy environment allows scope for development of proposals in this area, as well as a degree of assistance or subsidisation to maintain those more unprofitable rural services.

In its official response to the Consultation on a New Start for Public Transport, Translink/Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (the operator) state that advantages of the proposed model include “can be designed to safeguard marginal/unprofitable services which are deemed socially necessary/desirable.” (Translink, 2003). On the other hand, it may lead to services that are “less flexible/responsive, due to contract variation control procedures”. (Translink, 2003). Perhaps, more importantly in the context of social inclusion, Translink have highlighted the need to “draw attention to the need to safeguard services currently maintained through cross-subsidy”. (Translink, 2003).

It seems that much work needs to be done on these proposals to ensure they meet the regional transportation vision set out above. Despite this, many concerns remain, not least those expressed by the public transport operator. In terms of social exclusion and the need to employ public transport to further promote inclusion, difficulties lie in the opening up of services to market forces through tendering and private sector involvement.

The New Start for Public Transport in Northern Ireland comes on the back of the Regional Transportation Strategy, which has identified a number of areas with which to tackle social exclusion in Northern Ireland: “Local improvements in towns across Northern Ireland to assist pedestrians and cyclists and to provide new bus services throughout the day and the introduction of innovative, demand responsive transport services in rural areas

The Regional Transport Strategy moves to further highlight a number of key issues or ‘drivers for change, including ‘a growing awareness of the links between access to transport and social need... It is recognised, therefore, that by targeting efforts and resources, the RTS can have a real impact on some of the factors that cause social need and social exclusion and on the problems experienced by deprived and socially disadvantaged people in Northern Ireland’.

Much emphasis continues to be placed, throughout the strategy regarding ‘rural areas served by different types of accessible public transport drawn from a varied range, including flexible and community based services, responsive to local needs’. Thus, the RTS contains three principal components: ‘Transportation initiatives composed of infrastructure or service interventions, typically led by the Department for Regional Development or by the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company / Translink... Organisational, policy or legislative changes relating to transportation which will be undertaken by the Department for Regional Development and which form an integral part of the Strategy... Transportation related initiatives currently under way or planned by the Department for Regional Development and by other Government Departments or public sector bodies that will contribute to the achievement of the transportation objectives’.

These three ‘strands’ can be related directly to the problem of transport related social exclusion in rural areas of Northern Ireland. The main element of the drive to reduce or eradicate social exclusion in rural areas will inevitably lie at the feet of developments in these areas such as flexible and innovative transport services operating according to the local need and deviating off main routes as required, community transport partnerships and development of new fixed rural bus routes etc. The key element to be realised throughout is that of improvements to accessibility. Such developments in terms of the above will, perhaps not eradicate but reduce the effects of transport related social exclusion in rural areas of Northern Ireland.

It is envisaged, that by 2012, “rural ‘community’ bus services would experience a very large increase. This may be due to the increased frequency of the existing rural transport partnerships and especially the introduction of new public transport services to serve isolated communities and mobility impaired residents in rural areas across Northern Ireland”. (RTS for NI, 2001). The strategy also made provision for the introduction of concessions, such as free travel on buses and trains for pensioners over 65 years of age, within Northern Ireland.

1.2 Targeting social need action plan

Furthermore, the Department for Regional Development’s TSN Action Plan 2001 – 2003 states that it “aims to tackle social need and social exclusion by targeting efforts and available resources within departmental programmes towards people, groups and areas in greatest social need”. (DRDNI, 2000). The aim of promoting social inclusion will involve the identification and tackling of factors that exacerbate social exclusion. Once again, the recognition that public transport provision can “enhance accessibility to jobs, services and facilities of those in social need and who, generally, are more reliant on public transport provision”. (DRDNI, 2000). The development of a “modern, sustainable, safe transportation system which benefits society, the economy and the environment and which actively contributes to social inclusion and everyone’s quality of life”. (DRDNI, 2000) is, once again, highlighted here as Northern Ireland’s regional transportation vision.

In terms of public transport provision, the TSN Action Plan has identified two key issues to be addressed in the process of targeting social need in this area: “To target the Rural Transport Fund and the programme of transport for disabled people to improve travel opportunities for people who experience reduced mobility and social exclusion... and to continue to provide the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company and Translink with guidance in respect of New TSN both in its planning and practical application”. (DRDNI, 2000). Evidently, areas have been identified where action needs to be forthcoming with relation to the provision of public transport services for the less socially fortunate.

1.3 Rural Transport Fund (RTFNI)



Figure 2: RTF ‘easy to read bus stop flag in Plumbridge, a rural village in County Tyrone.

Much policy provision is made in the RDS and RTS for the increased development of the Northern Ireland Rural Transport Fund. The fund was set up in 1998 to provide subsidy

and non-financial support for new or enhanced rural Ulsterbus services as well as to provide assistance for the setting up and operation of community transport initiatives. The Rural Transport Fund (RTF) indicates, “It is important to introduce initiatives which encourage the use of public transport in rural areas” (RTFNI, 1998). The public transport operator, Translink also states that the Fund “has been established to help encourage more people to use public transport in rural areas”.

Furthermore, four specific objectives with which to support various projects, have been identified: “Target social need by improving rural people’s access to training or employment opportunities; complement the work of other agencies involved in the development of rural communities; support a range of community-based activities and have a broad base of community support; encourage volunteering activity”. (RTFNI, 1998).

As explained by the Fund, “reduced mobility compounds social exclusion, it denies the opportunity to access training, employment and opportunities for social interaction. For many people the erosion of their personal mobility can mean the loss of self-esteem and an independent lifestyle, which impacts negatively on their health and well being and places a greater dependence on support services.” It may seem that this explanation has been seen before, but in this sense it is related directly to the rural transport problem in Northern Ireland, thus, ensuring increased relevance to this research.

“These problems can be most acute in rural areas where low population density and dispersed services make it difficult to provide sustainable transport opportunities” (RTFNI, 1998). The pattern in recent years has seen a decline in services in rural areas where “many settlements have been left with no public transport service, and others with limited off-peak services, especially on an evening and weekend”. (RTFNI, 2000). This would seem to directly contrast with the Fund’s primary objective, which is, as also stated, to “reduce social exclusion by providing transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility in rural areas”.

Evidently, the main aspect of the RTF’s activities is the Rural Bus Subsidy. Ulsterbus is “under a policy obligation to provide socially necessary but uneconomic services through internal cross-subsidy” (RTF, 1998). It would seem, however, that the decline or ‘contraction’ of many bus services in recent years has led to an inability to cross-subsidise and maintain a number of routes. The RTF therefore undertakes to “provide some £750,000 Rural Bus Subsidy annually to support socially necessary but economic bus services in rural areas” under existing arrangements. The Fund also states that all services that qualify for RTF money must not have been in existence before March 1998.

The Rural Transport Fund for Northern Ireland explains that the three main objectives of the subsidy are: “to increase the availability of rural bus services in Northern Ireland, to improve access to facilities by public transport for rural residents who suffer from impaired mobility and to promote the use of alternative transport modes to the private car.

There is, of course, a specific need to assess the requirement for public transport in rural areas. These needs “mean that judgements need to be made in two principal areas: decisions as to where and when to provide services, especially in the absence of existing services to act as a guide, whilst ensuring appropriate use of public funds; and the setting of reasonable parameters for subsidy to new services, some of which would inevitably be substantial loss-makers, to ensure reasonable value for money”.

A system for looking at each new proposal and for “prioritising the initial application of new funds” had to be devised in order to achieve the subsidy’s aims. A procedure for assessment of rural areas was developed by the DRD in association with Translink. This procedure “scored the level of public transport provided for around 300 settlements in Northern Ireland that have less than 10,000 population.” (RTFNI, 2000) Three specific

criteria were looked at in this process; the total population in the immediate area(s) served by a particular route, the proportion of costs obtained through fares and the number of people using the service per operational hour. Based on the results obtained, so-called 'reasonable' service levels were proposed by a team of independent consultants. Then these "reasonable" scores are compared with the scores for existing bus services and the actual level of services provided" (RTFNI, 2000). In a sense, this approach enables a better understanding of the gap and a more accurate format on which to propose how to bridge that gap. Other elements in the planning process looked at revenue and to what extent costs are covered, passenger demand and the targeting of route developments.



Figure 3: Rural Transport Fund Information leaflets

Notwithstanding the provision of 54 new or enhanced services in February and March 1999 and 18 in September 1999, practical developments under the RTF and on the back of related policy initiatives include better information provision, through publications, advertisements, marketing initiatives, community development – rural community network and the rural development council which has provided a number of community 'accessible' minibuses to Community Transport Partnerships. Through the RTF, Translink have introduced numerous 'Rambler' services that include the Antrim Coaster (service number 252), the province's first rural Quality Bus Corridor, operating between Belfast and Portrush via Larne and the Coast Road. Other 'Rambler' services are the year round 'Sperrin Rambler' (service number 403) between Castledawson, Magherafelt and Omagh; the seasonal 'Mourne Rambler' (service number 405) and 'Causeway Rambler' (service number 402).

In 2003 the 'Gortin Rambler' (service number 401) started service in the Omagh area taking in the History Park, Gortin Forest Park and the Ulster American Folk Park on summer Saturdays and Sundays. Another new service for summer 2003 was the 'Lecale Rambler' (service number 406) in the Downpatrick area. Other RTF services include the Antrim Hospital link with Carrickfergus (service number 368B) and the Ulster Hospital link with Bangor and Craigtantlet (service number 301B).

Perhaps one of the most important and significant developments in terms of the policy context here is the Rural Rover (service number 20D). This service was set up in 2001 and took in rural villages on the route between Newcastle and Belfast. In September 2003, it took on a different element. As a pilot, and for the first time allowed by law in Northern Ireland, the Rural Rover now operates as a demand-responsive and flexible service. People in a rural area between Ballynahinch and Dundrum can phone and request the bus to deviate or 'rove' off the main route to pick them up as close to their home as possible. There is also a free 'Travel Club' scheme and this new type of service provides a viable alternative to the fixed service number 20 route.

The ABC or 'Access by bus to the countryside' scheme also forms part of the RTF and Translink's drive to combat social exclusion in rural areas: "40 new or revised Ulsterbus services have been introduced; 'Access by bus to the Countryside', the ABC scheme has been developed along the lines of 'rambler' services and whereby Translink works closely with Rural Community Transport Partnerships to provide technical advice. To date, 25 new minibuses have been purchased, on behalf of the DRD, for use by the partnerships; and the provision of over 250 Public Information points have been installed in rural areas." (Translink, 2002).

Funding levels for the RTF have been set out in the Regional Transportation Strategy to be applied throughout the ten years of the strategy (2002-2012). This funding extends to £18 million of a total of £106.9 million for bus transport and is targeted for use in "reducing social exclusion by providing or improving transport opportunities for people with reduced mobility through the provision of small vehicle public transport in deep rural areas... provides access to essential facilities in villages and towns" (RTS for NI, 2001). This funding is referred to as reference case funding which indicates it is akin to the existing level of funding continued. There are also targets set out for additional funding (if it becomes available) to be used for demand responsive transport services (£31.5 million) and new small vehicle fixed route public transport services (£4.7 million). The strategy states, that through the Rural Transport Fund, 'innovative demand responsive services for residents in many deep rural areas and for mobility impaired residents in rural settlements across Northern Ireland' are achievable with this extra funding becoming available. Some such money has already been put to good use with the development of the Rural Rover service (see above). This aim is further supplemented by 'new services linking isolated communities to villages and towns using a variety of innovative and standard vehicles' that is also dependent on the additional funding becoming available.

In terms of the Rural Transport Fund, there are numerous policy initiatives which are highlighted through the fund's own targets as well as the RDS and RTS. Many of these policies have and are being implemented as the RTS enters its second year of ten.

1.4 Community Transportation

Community Transport is a term that can broadly be interpreted as referring to informal public transport services. It also indicates the nature of transport provision as being specifically tailored to the needs of the community it serves as well as being provided by the community. Community transport has, perhaps, developed in the UK due to an inability or unwillingness on the part of Government or transport companies to adequately provide for rural communities. A number of 'unconventional' modes of community transport include, Community buses, multiple service buses, Ring and Ride, voluntary car schemes, lift-giving schemes, Post buses, free shoppers' bus. The very nature of community transport depends upon the willingness and ability of local people to give their services.

It is recognised that "partnerships between local community groups, local authorities and Translink have been central to Translink's role in providing public transport for rural communities" (Translink, 2002) and is a unique arrangement in the UK. "Many different agencies have an interest in maintaining rural community life in Northern Ireland and combating social exclusion that results from isolation...most of them have transport needs that are not fully met." (RTFNI, 2000).

The Rural Transport Fund has indicated the importance of the voluntary sector in the delivery of rural transport solutions. The Department for Regional Development has highlighted three strands of support in this area: "Rural Community Transport Partnerships, revenue and capital funding for local Community Transport projects, technical and training assistance for community organisations.



Figure 4: Coverage of Community Transport Services in N. Ireland at December 2003 (Rural Transport Fund for Northern Ireland)

In relation to this “there are many difficulties in running bus services in deep rural areas. With fewer passengers to pick up in a larger area, and with more mileage per passenger, the economic disadvantages are obvious and ultimately it may simply not be viable for a conventional bus operation. However, the continued vitality of rural life depends upon there being some basic transport links, particularly for those people who do not have access to private transport”. (RTFNI, 1998).

The importance of placing emphasis on five elements of a partnership’s operation is also highlighted. The partners are expected to “serve rural areas which have been identified as having disadvantage under the government’s ‘Targeting Social Need’ strategy; meeting the needs of those older and disabled people who are unable to make use of conventional services; meeting the needs of other disadvantaged groups; supporting the work of voluntary or community groups; utilising the spare capacity of other transport resources in the partnership’s area.” (RTFNI, 1998).

Currently, Community Transport operations include the hire of group minibuses to local and community groups with or without a driver, volunteer car schemes, accessible minibus operations, assessment and training of drivers of minibuses to raise standards of safety. There is much potential for some sort of vehicle-sharing arrangement to be developed, as continually highlighted by the RTF as well as the development of structures for making better use of existing resources in order to ensure that under-utilisation of transport vehicles is reduced.

1.5 Summary of issues and initiatives

Many developments have taken place through the establishment of the Rural Transport Fund and the targets set out by the Regional Development Strategy and the Regional Transportation Strategy. Despite these moves to promote social inclusion and to reduce transport disadvantage, problems still remain for many rural dwellers. Funding levels

remain a problem in terms of the ability to fulfil the objectives set out in a policy context, but more funds are being made available to address these issues.

Many rural areas are served by community transport partnerships, but there remain a number of regions where this is not afforded and these areas are, in many regards some of the most isolated and dispersed in Northern Ireland (South Fermanagh, West Tyrone and West Antrim). The lack of community transport continues to require addressing in these areas, as do the shortcomings in existing partnerships.

There can be no doubt that the introduction of Northern Ireland's first flexible demand responsive bus service, the Rural Rover, is a significant step in the right direction. Provision has now been made in legislation to allow such operations and funding is becoming available through the RTS and RTFNI to enable the expansion of this idea to many other areas of the province.

The policy environment in terms of rural transport and transport provision in general is largely unrecognisable thanks largely to the Regional Transportation Strategy. Many years of under funding are, at last, beginning to be addressed, albeit the policy must continue to be followed up by practical moves regarding its implementation. This is vitally important in order to fulfil the aims set out to "create an accessible countryside" and to "promote social inclusion".

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